



Autobiographical elements in the novels of R.K. Narayan

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Abstract

An autobiographical novel is a form of novel using auto fiction techniques, or merging of autobiographical and fictive elements. The literary technique is distinguished from an autobiography or memoir by the stipulation of being fiction. An autobiographical novel is partially fiction. Names and locations are often changed and events are recreated to make them more dramatic but the story bears a close resemblance to that of the author's life. Events may be exaggerated or altered for artistic or thematic purpose. Charles Dicken's "David Copperfield" is the best example for an autobiographical novel. R.K. Narayan needs no introduction in the literary world. The contribution of R.K. Narayan to the corpus of Indian Writing in English is his humor which is at once fresh and original. This paper is an attempt to show the autobiographical elements in the novels of R.K. Narayan.

Key Words: Autobiographical, Fiction, Memoir, Auto fiction.

Introduction

Every novel is autobiographical to some extent or other since the writer puts himself or herself into the characters he or she creates. A memoir differs from an autobiography. In a memoir, the author records the significant as well as the trivial events and experiences in his or her life. It is characterized by authenticity. Memory plays an important role in this creative process. However in an autobiography, the writer traces his growth as a person and the factors responsible for the development of his self. Thus a memoir is a mere chronicle of events where as an autobiography throws light on hither to unknown dimensions of the writer's personality. Many reviewers and scholars Treat memoirs and autobiographies as synonymous with each other. Jaya Prakash Narayana's "Prison Diary" and Sunil Gavaskar's "Sunny Days" are memoirs whereas Gandhi's "My Experiments with Truth" and Nehru's "Discovery of India" are autobiographies. R.K.Narayan is one of the creative geniuses of modern age. He makes an adroit use of autobiographical details in his novels. This paper analyses the autobiographical elements in some of his novels.

An autobiographical novel is a form of fiction in which auto fiction strategies are employed. In other words, the autobiographical and the fictive elements merge in an autobiographical novel. It is difficult to trace where the subjective ends and the objective starts. The two are indistinguishable from each other. Since an autobiographical novel contains fictive elements as well, the reader cannot expect only the autobiographical elements to be focused on. Often the names of persons and places are altered and events are made more demotic. The story however still bears a close similarity to that of the writer's life. The writer enjoys leeway to alter incidents and sometimes he or she even exaggerates them for achieving the desired artistic purpose. Some novels which depict settings or situation with which the author is familiar may not be autobiographical. Similarly novels in which minor aspects of a writer's life are depicted are not autobiographical. In order to be considered as an autobiographical novel, the protagonist or central character should be closely modelled. Often the author and the main plot should bear resemblance to major incidents or events in the writer's life. For example, Charles Dicken's Magnum opus, "David Copper Field" is an autobiographical novel in which the protagonist David stands for Dicken's real self. However Dickens' narrative is a rich and subtle blend of fictive and autobiographical elements. Another example is Ernest Hemmingway's; "A farewell to Arms" depicts several events and situations which are based on hemming way's experiences as an ambulance driver during the World War- II.

Autobiographical Elements in Narayan's Novels:

R.K. Narayan too like other creative geniuses makes an adroit use of autobiographical details in his novels and short stories. Only a few writers are endowed with the gift of blending imagination and personal life. They can achieve a subtle and judicious blend of the autobiographical and the fictive. For a creative artist personal life offers rich potential for expression. Narayan is a rare writer who has used some of his experiences in fiction and in doing so, achieved artistic equilibrium. "Swami and Friends" and "The English Teacher" are built upon the foundation of his autobiography. However there is clear diversity between fiction and autobiography in these two novels.¹

"Childhood is the kingdom we all left behind" says Salmon Rushdie. Swami in "Swami and Friends" and Krishnan in "The English Teacher" resemble Narayan in many ways. Swami is a child in the small town Malgudi and a (mis) adventures evoke nostalgia in the reader. Malgudi the place of action, in all the novels and short stories of Narayan, stands for the whole of India. Narayan's own childhood experiences in Mysore and Madras are reflected in Swaminathan. Let us examine the similarities.

¹ Narayan, R. K. *My Days*, New Delhi: Viking, 1974, Page No: 29.

1. Swami watches a small piece of tin skimming gently along in the gutter of Vinayaka Muduli street. This is reminiscent of Narayan Training the grasshoppers.
2. Swami, like Narayan, hates school and loves to play and have fun with friends.
3. The most conspicuous similarity is between the grandmother of Narayan and the granny of Swami. Narayan spends considerable part of his childhood with his grandmother in Madras. She takes care of him, showers affection on him and stands by him in the hour of crisis. She teaches him the Tamil alphabets, multiplications, Sanskrit slokas in praise of goddess Saraswathi. However she is a strict disciplinarian who has kept a vigil on him.

"My grandmother's preoccupations were several and concerned many other; she was a key figure in the lives of many."¹

Similarly grandmother is an inseparable part of swami's world. She is his tutor, Savior and mentor. Swami Shares every little secret with her. She tells him stories of Harischandra. She is a prototype of all Indian grand mothers who maintain Indian traditions and values. There are some more details with which Narayan deals in "Swami and Friends". They are all drawn mostly from Narayan's life. In "My days" Narayan describes how the street lamps are lit in his childhood by a lamp lighter.

In "Swami and friends" also we come across a man in a khaki coat lights the street lamps in Malgudi. Likewise Narayan refers to a few political developments albeit briefly in "Swami and Friends".

In the pre-independence India, the Hindus and their value- system were lampooned by the missionaries and the British administrator. In Narayan is childhood, the Hindus were at the receiving end in the schools and Colleges run by the missionaries. Narayan writes in "My Days".

"The scripture classes were mostly devoted to attacking and lampooning the Hindu Gods and violent abuses were heaped on idol - worship pars as a prelude to glorifying Jesus."²

Similarly the Teacher of Swami in "Swami and Friends" is a fanatic who scoffs at Hindu Gods and Hindus' way of life.

"Oh, wretched idiots! The Teacher said, clenching his fists why do you worship dirty, lifeless, wooden idols and stone images? Can they talk? No. Can they see? No. Can they bless you? No. Can they take you to Heaven? No. Why? Because they have no life."³

In My Days, Narayan speaks of his passion for football. He and his friends formed a football team and named it "Jumping Stars". Similarly in Swami and Friends from the MCC Team to play Cricket matches and one of the proposed for the team is "Jumping stars". It cannot be a coincidence.

Narayan's is father was the Head Master of a School. His uncle too takes keen interest in Narayan's is education. We find similar disciplinarians in "Swami and Friends". Narayan tells us about

² Narayan, R. K. , *My Days*, New Delhi :Viking, 1974, Page No : 12.

³ Narayan, R. K. , Mysore: *Swami and Friends* , Indian Thought Publications, 1983, Page No : 5.

Swami's father that much to Swaminathan's displeasure, his father's courts closed in the second week of May and his father begins to spend the afternoon at home. Swami fears that it may interfere with his afternoon rambles with Rajam and Mani.

“On the very third day of his vacation, father commands Swami when about stepping out of the house Swami Come here”.⁴

Thus Narayan's father and Swami's father are also prototypes and we come across them ever in our neighbor hoods.

Speaking of the "English Teacher" Narayan remarks that is heavily autobiographical, very little of it being fiction Krishnan is a fictitious character who is an inhabitant of Malgudi a fictional town.

Both Rajam, Narayan's wife and Susila, wife of Krishnan in the "English Teacher" contacted typhoid and died after prolonged illness. For Narayan as well the loss is irreparable. He cannot find solace after the demise of his beloved wife. The trauma and agony of Narayan are similar to the predicament of Krishnan. Krishnan accepts the death of his wife as a fact and tries to lead a normal life. Narayan on the other hand, is able to overcome his grief by taking refuge in creative writing. Thus for Narayan writing is a sort of therapy which enables him to bear the loss of his wife. For Krishnan Teaching provides an outlet to vent his emotions and beliefs.

Narayan's theory is that "fiction outlasts fact". He mingles incidents, both significant and trivial from his personal life and weaves them in his novels. This objective is to universalize the particular. The novel acquires both richness and profundity by virtue of the details drawn from the author's life. The ordinary routine life of Mysore appears in an organized and vibrant form in Malgudi. His prismatic imagination allows him to enjoy leeway while dealing with the known and familiar.

Thus Narayan achieves the artistic balance between autobiography and fiction and becomes a prolific writer.

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⁴ Ibid, Page No : 82.